

SOS RHINO (BORNEO) AND SABAHMAS PLANTATION – PARTNERS IN CONSERVATION

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Introduction

Habitat loss and modification are considered the primary threats to species throughout the world. Currently the dominant types of habitat disturbance are directly related to human activities. It is important to understand these processes in order to eliminate or at least mitigate the negative effects of habitat changes. Social considerations are also important as most tropical rainforest regions are found within the political borders of countries overwhelmed by poverty, weak social institutions, and great demand for natural resources to satisfy local, national and international markets (Cuaron, 2000).

The benefits provided by natural ecosystems are both widely recognized and poorly understood. Growth in human population and prosperity translates into increased conversion of natural ecosystems to agricultural, industrial, or residential use, but also into increased demand for ecosystem inputs, such as fresh water, fiber, and soil fertility, as well as increased pressure on the capacity of natural ecosystems to assimilate our waste, including air and water pollution as well as solid waste (Steiner et al. 2004).

Plantation agriculture in the tropics is generally perceived to be detrimental to biodiversity of its environment owing to the wide scale clearing of original forest land and subsequent establishment of monocultures of crops. However, there is awareness in Malaysian plantations to review this perception. Biodiversity can be increased in Malaysian plantations by adopting a determined policy to retain or create reserves for flora and fauna within them (Tajudin, Abdul Ghani & Ho, 2000).

Tajudin, Ghani & Ho (2000) stated that plantation agriculture is unlikely to match climax rainforest ecosystems in biodiversity. They outlined several strategies for sustaining and enhancing biodiversity in oil palm of Golden Hope Plantations Berhad. When implemented such efforts are expected to encourage greater variety of flora and fauna in a sustainable manner in Malaysian plantations without detracting from the productivity of the land. These strategies involved conservation and enhancement.

Another conservation initiative is underway in Sabahmas Plantation, Lahad Datu, a subsidiary of PPB Oil Palms Berhad. Here, the plantation is working closely with SOS Rhino (Borneo).

SOS Rhino (Borneo) and Sabahmas Plantations Sdn Bhd

SOS Rhino is a US-based non-profit foundation that focuses on the conservation of rhinoceros worldwide. SOS Rhino (Borneo) is a Malaysian-registered NGO working closely with SOS Rhino in the conservation of the rare and critically endangered Sumatran rhinoceros. Sabahmas Plantations is a subsidiary of PPB Oil Palms Berhad. The 10,000 ha plantation is located about 40 km from Lahad Datu and shares the western boundary with Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

Tabin Wildlife Reserve

Tabin Wildlife Reserve is situated within the Dent's Peninsular and covers an area of approximately 12,0521 hectares. Out of this, about 8,000 hectares is primary forest. It is the largest wildlife reserve in Malaysia, gazetted as such in 1984 for the Sumatran rhinoceros. Two-third of the reserve is surrounded by oil palm plantations. The Segama river starts from the ridges of Danum Valley, meandering along the southern, western and northern parts of Tabin reserve before discharging into the Sulu Sea. The Segama estuary is mainly lined by Nipah and mangrove. The major oil palm plantations are FELDA and Borneo Samudra in the East, Golden Crop, Tunku and Permai plantations in the south, Sabahmas Plantations in the west and Hap Seng Consolidated in the north. There are also many smaller plantations that share a common boundary with TWR.

Community Outreach Program (COP)

SOS Rhino (Borneo) has four long term strategies in Sumatran rhino conservation in Sabah namely *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation programs, research and community outreach program. The main threat of the species is poaching as rhino horns continue to be an attractive and valuable trophy. TWR is considered the last bastion of the Sumatran rhino of Borneo and the future of the species lies with the protection of the habitat.

The community outreach program or COP involves engaging with the local communities living in the vicinity of the reserve, the oil palm plantations that share the same boundary with TWR, resort operators in Tabin, government agencies and other NGOs working in Tabin. The main aim is to make them aware of the presence and plight of the Sumatran rhino in TWR in particular, and the importance of the species and its conservation at the State, National and International level.

The COP strategies are as follows:

- (i) SOS Rhino (Borneo) has established a base camp along the Segama river. It has another base camp in Dagat village, which is a Forestry Department guardhouse, which has now been handed over to SOS Rhino (Borneo). To have base camps will give the villagers an impression that SOS Rhino (Borneo) is serious and will stay for sometime in this area. This area is strategic because entry into the reserve

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can happen through the massive waterways. With the presence of SOS Rhino (Borneo) in this area, and the cooperation of the villagers, encroachments are monitored and reported to the authorities.

- (ii) SOS Rhino (Borneo) is engaged with plantation management all the time. We share information on the rhino surveys and invite them to participate in our rhino conservation seminars. The main purpose is to educate plantation managements on conservation, to make them aware of the benefits of the reserves to them, and the laws pertaining to forest reserves. We provide technical advice on conservation issues for plantations and assist them in establishing conservation areas within their properties. We also inform them of the benefit of being a partner in conservation.
- (iii) SOS Rhino (Borneo) through its network will promote the villages as eco-tourism destination. A Home-Stay Program has been set up in Dagat by the Sabah Wildlife Department, and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Oil Palm plantations around Tabin reserve can also participate in the eco-tourism business.

Sabahmas Plantations has been working with SOS Rhino since its inception in 2000. The plantation's interest started in establishing of a conservation area adjacent to Tabin Wildlife Reserve. SOS Rhino has assisted the plantation in the fauna inventory in the conservation area, and to prepare a proposal for the setting up and obtaining a permit for a zoological park from the SWD. With a conservation area in place, Sabahmas Plantations has set up a strong security unit to monitor and patrol its western boundary with Tabin reserve. The plantation has also maintained a strict check on movement into and out of the plantation.

Sabahmas Plantations is also hosting volunteers from SOS Rhino. After their rhino tracking, the volunteers are sent to Sabahmas Plantations where a special program is drawn up for them. It includes briefing on the oil palm industry, field tour with hands on experience and an educational tour of the oil mill. Here, volunteers mainly foreigners, are exposed to the agricultural practices, workers welfare and their conservation efforts.

When SOS Rhino (Borneo) was formed in April 2003, Sabahmas Plantations has supported the construction of its base camp along the Segama river. Since then, Sabahmas plantations has been providing a regular supply of operating materials to SOS Rhino (Borneo) Rhino Protection Units (RPU).

Basically the outcome of the community outreach program is the protection of Tabin reserve with the assistance of the local communities and oil palm plantations. For the villagers, a new source of income from tourism will give them a good reason to conserve their environment. The oil palm plantations on the other hand will generate goodwill and enhance its image when involved with and in conservation. This is a smart partnership leading to a win-win situation.

Recommendations

The standard approach to conservation has been the establishment of protected areas (PAs). They are very effective but many PAs are too small and isolated to sustain the full range of ecosystem services (Steiner et al. 2004). On the other hand, any area in place not suitable for oil palm should be retained as conservation area – whether as wetland or marshland, hill forests and riparian. Habitat-specific species will benefit from this decision.

Large oil palm plantations with their immense resources can do the following:

1. Allow areas unsuitable for planting oil palm to regenerate into natural forest, to retain wetland, or develop areas into conservation areas.
2. Enlarge, restore and rehabilitate riparian
3. Undertake a trial whereby elephants are allowed to move from one forest to another through mature oil palms (7 years and above)
4. To support conservation organizations in terms of funds, materials and logistics.
5. Establish a conservation department within the plantation
6. Teach conservation subjects in oil palm plantation training schools
7. Develop a long-term partnership with conservation organizations.

Reference

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